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# THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

## PSYCHOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC METHODS

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### METAPHYSICS AS A FINE ART

THE name of metaphysician hath a sounding excellence. In the pursuit of a profession, I have been something of a typographer, of a lexicographer, of a pedagogue, and in an amateur fashion of an anthropologist—all goodly Greek. But the core of my ambition (for I must confess it) is to be a metaphysician. I like the sonance of the name (in despite of those levitous persons who make an indecorous pun upon it); and I like the high freedom of metaphysical pursuits; and even more I like the desirable and eminent company of metaphysicians themselves, and to think myself a member—no matter how humble—of so ancient and honorable a guild.

Moreovèr, there is a fine complacency to be derived from the profession (which it is really no trick to profess) in its social bearings. You exchange cards with a stranger—say, in a Pullman—and after you have mutually mastered the articulation of one another's names, the leading question is sure to be:

“And what is your line, may I ask?”

To which, with a certain Jovian directness: “I am a metaphysician.”

A pause, and then: “Ah! . . . Ah, yes; a doctor?”

“*Per accidens* only,” you respond. “*Essentialiter* a metaphysician is unadorned by titles.”

Your companion is uncertain whether to continue the conversation or talk politics; but he is polite: “Is business good in your line? Does it pay well?”

And you: “Couldn't be better with me. How is it with *you*?”

“Slump all along the line. Nothing goes but war goods. Mine's women's wear.”

With a slightly bored readvertence, you rejoin: “I did not refer to material pursuits or pay. I alluded to the returns of metaphysics.”

The light of suspicion appears in his eye: “I miss your drive,” he says bluntly.

“Why,” you return patiently, “you also, though you may not be aware of it, are a metaphysician. Yours, to be sure, is only the

metaphysics of common sense, for you are a plain man (understand, I do not refer to your physical charms, which are quite the average), and because of your engrossment in practical affairs you have never become reflectively aware of such metaphysics as you have—yours necessarily, in the character of man, thinking and rational. My case is rather different. I am—pardon me for so putting it—upon a somewhat different level, an initiate, as it were, into the secrets of those illumined minds who have brought metaphysics into the daylight of its own self-awareness. It is very pleasant to be an initiate.”

The chances are against the continuance of the conversation, especially if you drop this last remark with a scarcely perceptible sigh of satisfaction. If it does continue the subject will probably be some very confidential information as to easy evasions of the prohibition law in dry states—for there is a fellowship in all inspirations.

Of the truth of the converse proposition, namely, that there is inspiration in all fellowships, I am by no means so fully persuaded. I do not refer merely to the company of the disreputable (where, indeed, I suspect that the inspiration of fellowship counts for most); but I do refer to certain forms of the association of metaphysicians themselves. There is—and this is the core of my qualm—a danger to metaphysics itself in a too social self-consciousness. It is not merely the company that the metaphysician keeps, but the fact that he keeps company in his metaphysics that is damaging. Metaphysics, the moment it becomes self-aware, develops a fine complacency, all its own, and surely not to be quarreled with by fellows of the craft; but when to this natural afflatus there is added the complement of the reflected complacencies of a whole school of associated spirits—well, *Meden agan!* even of metaphysical satisfactions.

Moreover, I have a deep and heretical suspicion that both the devices of association and the complacencies which it generates are inventions of an anti-metaphysical devil, for the ruin of the truth. This devil is a shrewd enemy, and he knows that metaphysicians (when they are such in their own conceit) are led easily into idolatry, and that of all delusive idols those of the Forum delude them most. And so he institutes metaphysical *thiasoi*, the members of which together clash their timbrels while they beat the brown earth with unanimous feet and sing dithyrambs in honor of the spirit of their intoxication. For it is the supreme guile of this arch-trickster to persuade all who cross the limen of metaphysical consciousness that your true initiate must be an *-ist* and must have an *-ism*—whereas all the time he is gleefully aware that the typical case of metaphysics (not, to be sure, necessarily with a benevolent prognosis) is that of your plain man, blissfully unconscious of his common sense and absorbed in the sale of women’s wear.

I should like to expatiate upon this suspicion of mine (which some, I fear, will view as a mere prejudice), and ask whether there is really any meaning, beyond the afflatus of the incantation, in proclaiming oneself a materialist or an idealist or an absolutist or a pragmatist or a neo-realist or a neo-realistico-logistico-mathematicist? And again, whether a book formidably published by Ali Baba and some forty co-conspirators can possibly be as good metaphysics as the honest records of a simple mind—such a work, say as *Samuel Pepys, His Diary*? or whether, indeed, it can touch such near and significant realities as the worthy householder himself, his wife and servaunt Jane? I should like to expatiate upon these germane questions; but the truth is I can not long tolerate, even for rebuttal, the sibilant syllable *-ist*. As I strive to rise to the issue I begin to see images of a canny sharp-featured face, with a finger at the nose, and I start at the warning sound—*Hist!*—close at the ear; and forthwith, from what *Kaiserreich* of ideations I know not, there stream before my bewildered fancy the serried ranks of the schools, all accomplished in the goose-step and all with unabated voice proclaiming *Gott mit uns! -ismus über Alles!*

For there seems to me to be something both monstrous and pathetic in this effort of metaphysicians to form in phalanxes and cohorts and to move with militant accord. It is monstrous because it so distorts nature, and most distorts the nature of that reason to which metaphysics is supposedly the highest devotion; for it takes from reason freedom of hypothesis which is reason's vital spark, and leaves but the stiff and jointed shell of the rational life; till at last it is but a mere mechanic slave who masquerades as your high empiric of the soul. And it is pathetic in that it is all done—this pedant scholasticizing—in answer to an old and silly jibe, with which Plato once toyed contemptuously. For there were smug-mouthed conversationalists in Athens as there are smug-mouthed conversationalists nowadays who spoke with pharisaical intonations of the disagreements of philosophers, and cast it up to them that their pretended science was a hurly-burly of opinions—each of which, by a clever verbosity, could be made to appear the better. As then, so now; still they make merry: “Behold the philosophers! after twenty-five centuries of wrangling, worse at odds than ever in their pretended science!”

Now the dismal face of the matter is not the certainty that they are right, and that metaphysics is indeed only a pretended science, but that there should be metaphysicians to make the pretension. That is what is dolorous about the schools, with their formalisms and acclamations, their postulates and *quod erat's*; they are trying to substitute the lugubrious technic of science for the free inspiration

of art—thereby perverting a noble art into a mimic science. History itself is their copious refuter; for what *-ist* is Socrates or Plato or Aristotle, Origen or Augustine or Aquinas, Descartes or Spinoza or Kant? Wherever metaphysics comes to its own, we encounter men, not *-isms*—and such men as no professor of the faith need fear to set beside the constellations of any other art. It is true that Plato was the first academic and Aristotle the first peripatetic; but this was the accident of their pedagogy, not the epiphany of their metaphysic. And, indeed, I am quite ready to own that there are legitimate schools, of which metaphysic is the prime mover and the final cause, expressing this tutorial relation of master and disciple. Such schools extend across the centuries, and keep alive among philosophers reverence for their saints and their heroes. Only (for the difference is portentous) they ought never to be confused with *-isms*; and hence, for the purification of the distinction, I prefer a more humane termination. For gladly would I call myself a Platonian, meaning thereby to express my *devoir* to so lordly a tutor. Surely if there be two homages that can be paid, the one to rote a master's phrases, the other to preserve his image in the soul, the latter were to him the sweeter duty—which who hath performed more lovingly or more unto all men's admiration than Plato for his master Socrates?

All metaphysic has a soul of poetry. The art of the metaphysician is a fine art. It has, of course, a special technic, which may be acquired by study. But it is not the sort of a thing that can be reduced to texts—any more than the art of poetry can be reduced to texts. It should be pursued, not in a classified routine, but in the mode of the *atelier*, with the disciple under the eye of the master. Peripatetic excursions, symposiac unions, these are the conducive forms, from whose practise is to be maintained the true succession of philosophy. They are the apprenticeships, whereby each that would be a journeyman of the craft is made familiar with its tools and its traditions and is joined to the fair fellowship of the guild, ere he be sent forth to create by his art such images as his soul inspires. So taught, your metaphysician is a true empiric; nor (even though his art may be misprized) does he smell of deceit to the multitude.

But (and I have been loquaciously outspeeding the question)—what of the truth? Is not the end of metaphysics the discovery of truth, and can truth be a private thing? Should one make of metaphysics an art, a thing of human craft and design?—nay, of such a mean conceit that it could only be an art of autobiography! Who, forsooth, will be concerned for the “Memoirs of a Metaphysician” when he might have those of a Bismarck or a de Maintenon or even the small-talk of honest Pepys?

Yes; metaphysics is a search for truth. Nevertheless, I refuse to be discomfited by the question. Rather, I compose myself to an attitude of celestial calm, and smile in suave Chinese. For it is that kind of a search for the truth which is, like poetry and the other fine arts, autobiographical in method. Of course, it is not all grasped by any one set of memoirs—any more than the truth of human history is all told in one career. Nor is it all told in memoirs writ on a level; a part of it at least is to be found in the business memoranda of the unconsciously reflective plain man, and there is metaphysical significance in the sale of women's wear which, even in war time, can not wholly slump. To be sure, there are philosophers not a few who will cry fie upon such a humanly tainted thing. But my Oriental calm is unsubdued. For I think that the whole world of reason and the truth of all things desirable is embraced within the scope of this metaphysic, which never has been and never will be complete while men continue to live and to discover that they live. Wherefore I draw about me the ample cloak left me by mine uncle Protagoras and go my way in contentment.

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## PRAGMATISM AND DEMOCRACY

### I

“JUST what philosophy is nobody seems to know, but at any rate a philosopher is one who practises it.” These words, which I have just read from the pages of a current magazine, represent more than a labored effort to be amusing. They express a rather widespread feeling that philosophy has, in the vein of the epigram, suffered much from many practitioners. The truth is that philosophy is not so much in the midair of uncertainty as that a certain *method of philosophizing* has led to obscurity and confusion. And that method is the German method. This is neither a patriotic nor a spiteful remark. It *was* the German method that turned metaphysics into a logic of dialectic and fostered that inordinate preoccupation with abstractions which has subjected philosophy to caricature.

Now I believe that philosophy can be intelligently defined and I also believe very profoundly in its practical value.

In understanding a man's life two questions must always be asked. First, what has he done? And, secondly, why has he done it? To say this is not to say anything that is profound or obscure,